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## **When is a prison gang not a prison gang: A focused review of prison gang literature**

Carter F. Smith

### **Abstract**

Communities everywhere have experienced the negative effects of street gangs, whose members commit crimes, and often end up in prison. Other gangs form in prison, and their influence often extends to the streets. The presence and influence of prison gang members in the community increases the threat of violence to citizens. Research on prison gangs has been conducted regularly since the mid-1980s. At that time, a thorough survey of the U.S. prison gang climate was conducted. That research included a brief reference to the Gypsy Jokers as the first U.S. Prison gang in the Washington State Penitentiary, in 1950. No original source of that information was identified. Since then, a handful of scholars have recited the same information, sometimes identifying the 1985 work, and at other times, identifying secondary sources. The Gypsy Jokers are, and have been, a motorcycle gang, and are considered an Outlaw Motorcycle Gang (OMG) by law enforcement. They have consistently identified their origin in San Francisco, CA, in 1956. They are not, nor have they ever claimed to be, a prison gang, and their first presence in Washington State was in the 1960s. This article was developed with research included in a textbook on gangs that is pending publication (Knox, Gilbertson, Etter, and Smith, 2016).

Keywords: prison gang members, prison gangs, definition of prison gang, history of prison gangs, first prison gang, gangs in prison, motorcycle gangs in prison, security threat group, STG, gang crime, research articles, gypsy jokers

### **Introduction**

Prison gangs influence criminal activity and behavior in prisons, in jails, and on the streets of many communities. Prison gang members often have ties to street gangs, and they influence much of what the street gangs do and the profits from their illicit activity. This article will examine the early literature documenting the history of prison gangs, especially the erroneous identification of the Gypsy Jokers, as the first U.S. prison gang. Authors of both research articles and manuscripts use the original research of others to give context and support to their findings. It is critical that the information obtained from others is accurate, and as close to what was provided in the original source as possible. Failure to ensure the accuracy of one's research may cause others to build upon a faulty foundation, damaging the credibility of their research.

### **Definition**

No analysis of such a phenomenon as prison gangs can be undertaken without ensuring a working definition has been identified. Lyman provided the most oft-cited and earliest identified definition, defining a prison gang as:

“An organization which operates within the prison system as a self-perpetuating, criminally oriented entity, consisting of a select group of inmates who have established an organized chain of command and are governed by an established

code of conduct” (1989, p. 48).

Knox (2012) identified a prison gang as “any gang (where a gang is a group of three or more persons who recurrently commit crime, and where the crime is openly known to the group) that operates in prison” (para. 8). The National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC) defined prison gangs as “criminal organizations that originated within the penal system that have continued to operate within correctional facilities throughout the U.S., including self-perpetuating criminal entities that can continue their operations outside the confines of the penal system” (2013, para. 13). Thus, the potential for growth and criminal activity by prison gangs extends outside the prison, while still requiring an origin within.

### **Before the gangs**

Scholars of the mid-1900s noted that inmates in prisons used an *inmate social system*. Those systems provided a way to keep inmates from internalizing the negative psychological effects of incarceration (McCorkle & Korn, 1954). The inmate social system allowed an inmate to ensure his acceptance into the group of inmates with whom he affiliated inside the prison. It also protected the inmate from negative effects caused by the loss of his social group outside of prison while incarcerated. Members of those groups had similar values and moral codes. The system was rigidly hierarchical and included extreme authoritarianism (McCorkle & Korn, 1954).

Before prison gangs assumed governance of prison systems, there was an *inmate code*. The inmate code (also known as the *convict code*) identified the informal rules that developed within the inmate social systems. The inmate code emphasized unity of the inmates against the corrections officers. If an inmate ignored the code, they were relegated to a “low rung on the social ladder” (Skarbek, 2014, p. 19). The inmate code was an adaptation of the “thieves code,” which was simply “thou shalt not snitch” (Irwin, 1980, p. 12). Ironically, the inmate code often reinforced the “values of the administration” (Stastny & Tyrnauer, 1982, p. 142).

Although each institution had a slightly different variation, the inmate code often included:

1. Don't Interfere With Inmate Interests. Never rat on another inmate, don't be nosy, don't have loose lips, and never put an inmate on the spot.
  2. Don't Fight With Other Inmates. Don't lose your head and do your own time.
  3. Don't Exploit Inmates. If you make a promise, keep it, don't steal from inmates, don't sell favors, and don't go back on bets.
  4. Maintain Yourself. Don't weaken, whine, or cop out. Be a man and be tough.
  5. Don't Trust Guards Or The Things They Stand For. Don't be a sucker, the officials are always wrong and the prisoners are always right.
- (JailSergeant.com, 2015).

Older, respected convicts could break the code on occasion, but “the threat of violence and loss of respect kept most prisoners from doing so” (Irwin, 1980, p. 74). The code reduced conflict with others by “coordinating people’s actions and expectations” (Skarbek, 2014, p. 27). The code was a *charter* in prison society, containing “an inversion of conventional values and a call for solidarity against the keepers by the kept” (Stastny & Tyrnauer, 1982, p. 133). Both, the inmate

social system and the inmate code lost their effectiveness over time and became quite ineffective between 1950-1970 (Skarbek, 2012).

### The “first” prison gang in the U.S.

Camp and Camp (1985) appeared to be the earliest (and original) source of the claim regarding the first U.S. prison gang, and their work was cited as such by several authors. Camp and Camp conducted an exhaustive analysis of prison gangs in the U.S. At the time, they reported “the first gang was formed in 1950 at the Washington Penitentiary in Walla Walla” (Camp and Camp, 1985, p. 20), without identifying their source(s). It was assumed that the source was one of their interviewees or survey respondents, likely a correctional employee from the penitentiary, who obtained such information from an inmate. In a table included in the report (replicated in Table 1 below), they listed the Gypsy Jokers (1950), Mexican Mafia (1957), (Gangster) Disciples and Vice Lords (1969) as the first prison gangs formed in the U.S.

*Table 1. When and Where Prison Gangs began in the U.S.*

Year	Jurisdiction	Gang
1950	Washington	Gypsy Jokers*
1957	California	Mexican Mafia
1969	Illinois	Disciples
		Vice Lords
1970	Utah	Aryan Brotherhood
		Nuestra Familia
		Black Guerilla Family
1971	Pennsylvania	PA Street Gangs
1973	Iowa	Bikers
		Vice Lords
1974	North Carolina	Black Panthers
	Virginia	Pagans
	Arkansas	KKK
1975	Arizona	Mexican Mafia
	Texas	Texas Syndicate

Source: Camp, G.M., and Camp, C.G. (1985). Prison gangs: Their extent, nature, and impact on prisons. South Salem, NY: Criminal Justice Institute, page 20.

\* This group was included in the original list. The author was unable to find support for that inclusion.

Initial research by the author showed that the claim regarding the Gypsy Jokers was potentially false. The Gypsy Jokers was founded as a motorcycle gang in California, six years after their reported existence in the Washington State Penitentiary (WSP). From their own history, the Seattle, WA Chapter of the Gypsy Jokers didn’t exist for the first eleven years after the gang was formed. The Gypsy Jokers were founded on April Fool’s day, 1956 (Isaacs, 2004, Gypsy Jokers

Motorcycle Club, 2015). They moved north, about 1967, to Washington and Oregon following a dispute with the Hells Angels, another Outlaw Motorcycle Gang (OMG). Additionally, Thompson's first-hand account identified "only one chapter," in San Francisco, in 1964 (1966, p. 5).

## Research Method

The origin of the claim that the Gypsy Jokers were the first prison gang was traced to the Camp and Camp (1985) report. That report was the first to mention the group, although the source of that information was not identified. A systematic and thorough review of the literature was conducted on the topic of the Gypsy Jokers as a prison gang. The review included peer-reviewed and professional journals that addressed the topic, not including references to the Gypsy Jokers as a motorcycle gang. Newspaper and magazine articles were not included in the search, nor were public Internet websites. The review was limited to publications since 1950.

\* \* \*

Table 2: Summary of research identifying first U.S. prison gang

Year	Author/Publication	Source	How reported
1985	Camp and Camp/U.S. Department of Justice	None cited	"the first gang was formed in 1950 at the Washington Penitentiary in Walla Walla"
1990	Fong/Federal Probation	Camp and Camp	"the formation of prison gangs began in 1950 when a group of prisoners at the Washington Penitentiary in Walla Walla organized themselves to become known as the Gypsy Jokers"
1994	Casillas/ Federal Probation	None cited	"the first known prison gang was the Gypsy Jokers, a gang which emerged from a penitentiary in Washington State in the early 1950's"
1996	McShane, M. D., & Williams, F. P. <i>Encyclopedia of American Prisons.</i>	None cited	"The Gypsy Jokers Motorcycle Club, in the Walla Walla, Washington, state penitentiary in 1950, was the first prison gang on record. The exact date of its origin differs according to different official sources."
1997	Orlando-Morningstar/ Special Needs Offender Bulletin	None cited	"one of the first documented prison gangs, the Gypsy Jokers, appeared in a Washington state penitentiary in the early 1950s"
2001	Fleisher and Decker/ Corrections Management Quarterly	Orlando-Morningstar; Stastny & Tyrnauer	"The first known American prison gang was the Gypsy Jokers formed in the 1950s in Washington state prisons"
2006	Fleisher/Vera Institute of Justice	Orlando-Morningstar; Stastny &	"The Gypsy Jokers were the first known American prison gang formed in the 1950s in Washington state prisons"

		Tyrnauer	
2006	Kawucha/Masters thesis	Camp and Camp; Fleisher and Decker	“Prison gangs were first identified on the West Coast in the 1950s; the Gypsy Jokers in the Walla Walla prison in Washington State in 1950, and the Mexican Mafia (La EME) in 1957 at the Deuel Vocational Institute in California”

\* \* \*

### Follow up and discussion

The Camps authored two studies in the 1980s regarding prison gangs. The first in 1985, entitled *Prison Gangs: Their Extent, Nature, and Impact on Prisons* (1985), was funded by the Office of Legal Policy’s Federal Justice Research Program (personal communication, J. Brooks, May 4, 2015). That study was focused on a national inventory of prison gangs. As was noted previously, the report identified the Gypsy Jokers as the first U.S. prison gang without identifying the original source of that information. The Camp and Camp report (1985) indicated “more detailed histories of individual gangs will be discussed in the case studies section of this report” (p.20). The case studies section (pp. 65-189) made no mention of Washington State or the Gypsy Jokers.

\* \* \*

Many scholars have since identified the Gypsy Jokers as the first known prison gang in the U.S., formed in the 1950s, in Washington state prisons (often citing Stastny & Tyrnauer, 1983 and Orlando-Morningstar, 1997). Stastny and Tyrnauer (1983) made no mention of the Gypsy Jokes organization, although their work had extensive analysis of the WSP and the period from 1950 forward. Stastny and Tyrnauer (1983) specifically identified a period of prison unrest beginning in 1953 in the WSP. They identified sporadic outbreaks of violence culminating in a riot in 1955. The closest mention of an organized group in any of those situations was the identification of “Big Jim Frazier,” the leader of the “con bosses” being in control of the prison (p. 81). Had a prison gang existed at WSP at the time, it was thought they would have been involved in the unrest and identified.

\* \* \*

Upon further inquiry by the author with the Camps, the following was clarified:

“the Mexican Mafia in California was the earliest gang that developed solely inside prison walls. Gangs grew up independently in other states, like the Texas Syndicate and the Arizona HighWall Jammers. In Illinois there were street gangs that moved into the prisons when members were convicted of crimes and incarcerated. One would have to study the origins of the street gangs to find out when the original gangs like the Latin Kings etc. began, and I would imagine they came before the CA gangs” (personal communication, C. Camp, May 4, 2015).

Regarding the apparent discrepancy with the identification of the Gypsy Jokers OMG as the first

prison gang, a representative responded, “Unfortunately, based on the fact that those studies were conducted 30 years ago, it is hard to remember everything about these studies and we have a lack of resources to research further” (personal communication, J. Brooks, May 4, 2015).

## Conclusion

\* \* \*

This history highlights the necessity to properly cite and verify information found while conducting research. While the ‘credit’ for being the first prison gang may be a relatively insignificant scholarly issue, the ease with which research was recited, and mis-cited, indicated more than a cursory examination of sources was needed. If the Gypsy Jokers had a history in Washington State prior to the mid 1960s, especially as the first ever prison gang, it was likely the contemporary Gypsy Jokers organization would have made such a claim. It would have been difficult for that to occur, since the acknowledged founder did not arrive until after 1965.

Organization leaders, especially those engaged in organized crime, tend to use history to give their organization credibility, and the title of ‘first prison gang’ as a motorcycle gang would entitle one to bragging rights. Additionally, sources from a variety of perspectives provided information to the contrary, and the original source was unable to substantiate the information originally reported or refute the information to the contrary. Also, the secondary sources who failed to cite their primary sources became de facto primary sources for their readers.

So, when is a prison gang not a prison gang? When it is an Outlaw Motorcycle Gang? To retain a title, the organization would need to make such a claim. No such claim has been or is being made, and no valid sources have been found to substantiate the claim. It appears the Mexican Mafia was, in fact, the first U.S. prison gang (Camp and Camp, 1985).

## About the Author

As a U.S. Army CID special agent, Dr. Carter F. Smith was involved in military and federal law enforcement for over twenty-two years. He served fifteen years at Fort Campbell, KY, where he was instrumental in identifying the growing gang problem that began affecting the military community in the early 1990s. In 1998, he became the inaugural team chief for the Army’s first Gang & Extremist investigations team.

He teaches a variety of criminal justice and security topics at Middle Tennessee State University.

He has been interviewed about gangs by several national, regional and local television, print, Internet and radio news sources, and has appeared twice in the History Channel’s Gangland series. He is an executive board member of the Tennessee Gang Investigators Association and a two-time recipient of the Frederic Milton Thrasher Award of the National Gang Crime Research Center.

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